

Media release

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### **350 women each year to benefit from Herceptin funding decision**

About 350 women are set to benefit each year from the decision to fund Herceptin for early HER2-positive breast cancer.

Funding will be available from 1 July this year in a move that represents an investment of \$6 million per year by District Health Boards.

A nine-week course of Herceptin, in combination with a taxane drug (such as docetaxel or paclitaxel), will be funded for women with HER2-positive early breast cancer.

PHARMAC's deputy medical director Dr Dilky Rasiah says the decision represents a positive step for the treatment of HER2-positive breast cancer in New Zealand.

"This way of using Herceptin has been shown to reduce the chances of breast cancer tumours returning as effectively as any of the longer treatment duration studies," says Dr Rasiah. "In addition it is delivered in a shorter time frame, is cost-effective and is affordable for District Health Boards."

"We have made this decision to fund 9 weeks Herceptin because it can be justified under PHARMAC's decision criteria. These criteria include consideration of cost-effectiveness (i.e. cost relative to clinical benefit and risks), total cost, impact on DHB resources and Government priorities for health funding."

By contrast says Dr Rasiah, funding 12 months treatment with Herceptin cannot be justified under PHARMAC's decision criteria.

"This is a practical and affordable solution and will improve the prospects for women diagnosed with HER2-positive breast cancer."

Wairarapa DHB CEO David Meates, a spokesman for District Health Boards on pharmaceuticals, says DHB cancer centres will be able to implement funded treatment from 1 July.

"This is great news for women with HER2-positive breast cancer," he says. "PHARMAC and DHBs have put in a tremendous amount of work to reach a solution that will improve outcomes for women with HER2 breast cancer while being affordable and pragmatic. We are delighted with the outcome and look forward to providing this high quality care to women with breast cancer from 1 July."

In addition to the funding decision, PHARMAC will be developing resources for women with breast cancer and their families.

Dr Rasiah says developing these resources will help people understand more about HER2-positive breast cancer and the treatment options that are available, including Herceptin.

The resources will also help women understand the need to give informed consent to receive the subsidised treatment. As nine weeks concurrent therapy is not currently approved by medicines regulator Medsafe, patients will have to give their consent to allow doctors to administer it. Prescribers need to be aware of and comply with their obligations under section 25 of the Medicines Act to prescribe medicines for unapproved indications. Access to treatment in this way (under section 25 of the Medicines Act) is often used for other cancer medicines, says Dr Rasiah.

“It is important that women being offered treatment have confidence in that treatment; our aim is that these resources, which will outline all the available evidence, will provide that reassurance and confidence.”

“We now look forward to New Zealand women with HER2 positive early breast cancer receiving funded treatment with Herceptin and improving their treatment outcome as a result.”

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